The Roots of Ise Shrine and the Folk Architecture of Sulawesi

著者	INOUE Shoichi
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Inoue Shoichi

Today I want to present you a story about architecture of *jinja*, the shrines of traditional Japanese Shinto. Sometimes Japanese gods come down on these *jinja*; sometimes they dwell in them. According to an old custom, people often pray in front of these shrines.

Usually we think of Shinto as a religion which appeared in the pre-historical age.

In the 6th century, Buddhism was introduced into Japan from China, Korea and the Asiatic continent. Shinto is considered as a religion, which goes back to the days before the introduction of Buddhism.

Buddhism was a newcomer in the 6th century, and brought with it many forms of belief, which Japan had not previously provided. For example, the huge sacred spaces of the Buddhist temple were now introduced into Japan for the first time. Until then there had only been small shrines across Japan. Indeed, in prehistory, Japanese had treated certain miniature houses as the dwelling space of gods, but they had never built large religious architecture on the scale of Buddhist temples.

The people of that age must have been surprised at the appearance of Buddhist temples. The native religion, Shinto, tried to model its shrines on these newly-arrived temples, and shrines larger than ever before, began to appear on the landscape. The enlargement of shrines took place in response to the stimulation of Buddhist temples.

However, shrines did not copy the shape of Buddhist temples. They kept the traditional and folk style known as *takayuka tatemono* (literally "high floor structure"). This is a wooden building in which the floor is raised, placed in high position, and so separated from the ground level. Many scholars think that some traditionalism operated in the way in which foreign architecture was adopted in the case of Shinto.

Chinese Buddhist temples were roofed over with tiles. But *jinja* or Shinto shrines did not follow suit. Their roofs were made of grass, following the old style. Buddhist temples lined up flat stones on the ground, and stood wooden poles on these stones, but *jinja* erected their poles by sinking their base into the ground, according to folk ways. The walls of Buddhist temples are built of mud, but *jinja* retained the wooden wall. Chinese Buddhist temples painted their buildings red, green and so on; they were as decorative as could be. But *jinja* refused coloring, and disliked showy ornaments; they insisted on plain wood.

Buddhist architecture was more civilized than Shinto architecture. Where they were built with high-grade technology, Shinto shrines were built simplistically with low technology; Shinto shrines were soon damaged and easily so. The rain and wind easily ruined the grass roofs, and the lower sections of the wooden poles under the ground were quick to rot.

Nevertheless, Shinto shrines did not select a new architectural style. This was the age of new

technology, and yet Shinto shrines were built in the way of old architecture. Shinto people persisted in old customs, in the knowledge that they were not rational.

Afterward, the situation changed, and the shape of Shinto shrines became more and more similar to the shape of Buddhist temples. In the 15th or 16th century, some Shinto shrines were built just as though they were temples.

But the Ise shrines have kept their old style right up to the present day. The Ise shrines may be thought of as the ancestral mausoleum of the Japanese imperial family. And it is said that the Ise shrines have repeatedly rebuilt themselves every 20 years in the same fashion. Anyway, the ancient form of the Shinto shrine still remains only in Ise and related shrines.

The Ise shrines have in fact received a measure of influence from Buddhist architecture, so that the ancient way has not been handed down with precision in the Ise shrines. Still, usually it is said that the Japanese traditional way of architecture has been transmitted in Ise shrines, at least to some degree. The roofs of the Ise shrines are elevated by two ridge-supporting poles in what is a very old style. These poles began to disappear elsewhere in the age when Buddhism was introduced into Japan; and yet they still survive in Ise shrines.

It is certain that the high floor structure with the ridge-supporting poles existed widely in prehistory. Today's archeologists have discovered many traces of poles, which prove the existence of this structure. And we know many prehistoric paintings which represent this structure.

The archeological restoration of ancient buildings, including the high floor architecture with the ridge-supporting poles, is attempted often in today's Japan. This sort of restoration is a work of social education designed to illustrate for the public the style—sometimes in full-scale—of ancient architecture. However, except for the pole holes in excavation sites, there are in fact few materials on which to base restoration of ancient architecture.

Thus the scholar has these holes, and nothing else, on which to base his or her imagination of the figure of ancient architecture.

The historian of architecture tends to refer to the shape of the Ise shrines. They are recognized to be examples, which retain the ancient style of pre-historical Japan before the introduction of Buddhism. Indeed, the restoration of ancient architecture is usually attempted according to the shape of the Ise shrines. Here and there we can find examples of restoration, which follows the lead of the Ise shrines in a simple or naive way.

However, it is my argument that the shape of the Ise shrines does not constitute a reliable model on which to base restoration.

I really should not use the word restoration. I had better transform this word info "recreation," because these revivals of ancient architecture have been based on an illusion. But, these works have been carried under the name of restoration, or *fukugen* in Japanese. I therefore use this word with ironical connotations.

In the 20th century, the Ise shrines were reconstructed as the finest architectural specimens. The selected master carpenters rebuilt the shrines using parts of outstanding quality. Indeed, the architecture of the Ise shrines today can be compared to a large craft object, refined by the movement of the Shinto revival after the Meiji restoration of 1868.

Japan entered a great epoch of civil war in the 15th century which endured till the 16th century. In that age, the Ise shrines abandoned the custom of the periodic building for a hundred years. The architecture of Ise was reduced to ruin. After the civil war, Shinto priests and carpenters at Ise rebuilt the shrines, but they had no exact memory of the shrines. As a result they rebuilt without precision.

The figure of today's Ise shrines is thus different from that of the original Ise shrines. Probably, the original Ise shrines would be related to that of pre-historical high-floor architecture with the ridge-supporting poles, but we can not picture that ancient past through modern Ise.

I said earlier that Chinese Buddhist architecture exerted no influence on Ise shrines, but actually, Buddhist architecture had some influence on Ise. For example, in the Ise shrines each building is placed symmetrically, just as in the case of the Chinese Buddhist temples. Like Buddhist temples, the main buildings of Ise shrine have their steps before the front entrance, and are surrounded by wooden-floored corridors. Not all of the elements of ancient architecture before the age of Buddhism's introduction remain in Ise.

As I have already intimated, today, we can not see the architecture of high-floor structure with the ridge-supporting poles except at Ise and related shrines. However, this is perhaps an argument of narrow horizons. After all, it is applicable only to the Japanese islands. In fact, we can see these very same architectural styles on the islands of the South China Sea and the South Pacific. For example, the ethnic buildings of the Philippines and Sulawesi are erected in this way.

A long time ago, before the Han Empire, the architecture comprising the high-floor with the ridge-supporting poles spread widely throughout, and to the south of, the Long River valley in China. But the civilization of the Yellow River valley drove primitive architecture like this from China so that, in fact, some ethnic architecture, which has survived in the Philippines, Sulawesi and elsewhere, has its origins in China.

This architectural style was also then introduced in pre-historical Japan. The original form of Shinto shrines, including Ise, is indeed derived from it. The figure of early Ise shrines which endure to this day, involving some transformation by later generations, was inspired by two types of Chinese architecture.

In China, the architectural culture of the Yellow River valley drove away the architectural culture of the Long River valley. But in Japan, the former refined the latter. And thus was the early Ise architecture born. I think this is one of the routes by which—one of the typical ways in which—so-called traditional Japanese culture developed.

But this is the story after Buddhism's introduction. This progress did not work in prehistory or before Buddhism's advent. We should not overlook this history when we imagine the figure of ancient architecture. We have to take account of the ethnic architecture of the Philippines, Sulawesi and elsewhere, when we try to recreate pre-historical architecture. The reason for this is that the pre-historical architecture in proto-Japan and the ethnic architecture in the southern islands share a common ancestor in the architecture of the Long River valley before the Han Empire.

In prehistory, Japanese culture was not yet clearly in evidence. We should imagine this age in its true international context. I propose that we stop the established way of restoration based on the Ise shrines. I want to advocate an alternative way that is connected rather to cultures beyond Japan's shores such as can be found in the ethnic architecture of Sulawesi in Indonesia.

Rest assured that recently some architectural historians have been changing their ideas. A few attempts at recreation of early Japanese architecture that seek inspiration in the ethnic architecture of Indonesia have begun to appear gradually. These historians are still in the minority, but the academic environment is on the cusp of change.